

*ordinary* PEOPLE  
*extraordinary*  
COURAGE

MEN AND WOMEN OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

**Lesson 3: Coded words and the Underground Railroad**

**The Objective:**

The objective of today's lesson is to introduce terminology that enslaved people would use to communicate and how these terms and their definitions have been passed on through oral history.

**The Overview:**

During the next three lessons, students will be introduced to different types of storytelling and communication that occurred throughout the Underground Railroad. This lesson sets students up for success for the next lesson, where they will be looking into song lyrics from spirituals, and will determine how they could be used to communicate.

**Standards:**

- Indiana Standards: 3rd grade: 3.1.5,3.1.6, 3.1.7, 3.3.3, 4th grade: 4.1.7, 4.1.8, 4.1.15, 5th grade: 5.1.20, 8th grade: 8.1.24,8.1.25, U.S. History: USH 1.3
- Kentucky Standards (2018\*)5th grade: 5th grade: SS-05-5.1.1, 5.2.4, 2.3.1,2.3.2, 8th grade: SS-08-2.1.1, 2.3.1, 4.1.1, 4.2.3, 4.3.2, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.2.4, U.S. History

**Materials:**

- Informational Essay by Dr. Bryan Walls <http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/underground-railroad/stories-freedom/underground-railroad-terminology/>
- **Coded Word Graphic Organizer** (terminology definition template)
- Reflection Template

**Timing:**

- (1) 45-60 minute session. Depending upon work time, and instructionally how article is presented to students (individually or group). 10 minutes for the introduction, 25-30 minutes for the work time, 10-15 written reflection



## LESSON PROGRESSION:

**Lesson 1.** Introduce the topic of storytelling to students, by asking, “Can history be told through stories?” Generate and collect responses, trying to elicit specific examples whether it is from personal history or historical concepts related to National or State history.

**Lesson 2.** From that discussion, launch the idea that over time stories in history have been passed down through generations, and it is from that story telling that we are able to gain glimpses into the Underground Railroad. The majority of communication was completed in code or sypher, so historians depend on stories from history to fill in the gaps where we do not have primary source evidence. Secondary sources, like stories, often have many coded words with multiple meanings so slaves and those helping them could communicate without fear of punishment from authorities.

**Lesson 3.** Before introducing students to the informational essay written by Dr. Walls, give students the **Coded Word Graphic Organizer** (page 5).

**Lesson 4.** Students will complete the “before reading” side of the **Coded Word Graphic Organizer**.

**Lesson 5.** Once complete, distribute the essay for student reading and annotation. This essay is written by Dr. Bryan Walls. He was commissioned by PBS to tell the story of William Still, a famous African American abolitionist.

- For Elementary, this text could be delivered in triads. This is a higher- level text, so it could be helpful to break apart the reading into check points to determine comprehension. For example, when delivering this instruction to a Fourth- grade class, the text was broken down by main ideas after each page. A small class discussion following just to insure comprehension.

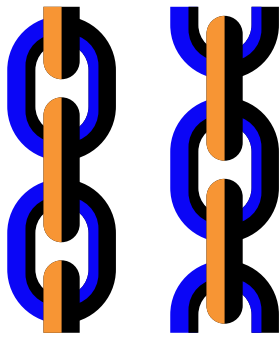
**Lesson 6.** While reading, students can begin to fill in the organizer where they are determining the meaning of the actual coded words.

**Lesson 7.** If not working in groups already, have students come together to share their revelations about the meanings of the coded words.

### **Evaluation/Assessment:**

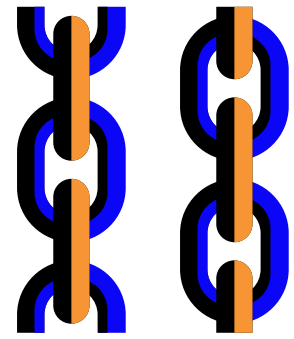
I. Evaluation of student understanding can be completed through:

- a. Whole group discussion of terms to check for accuracy, followed by the critical thinking question of, “Why was it necessary for slaves and Underground Railroad participants to communicate using coded words?”
- b. This question is also presented in a reflective template included in this lesson plan.



# FREEDOM MARKER: KNOWLEDGE

by Dr. Bryan Walls



As a descendent of travelers on the Underground Railroad, I grew up fascinated by what the "Griot" of my family told me. My Aunt Stella, the storyteller of our family, was termed the "Griot," an African word for "keeper of the oral history." She passed away in 1986 at 102 years of age, but her mind was sharp until the end of her life. Aunt Stella told me that John Freeman Walls was born in 1813 in Rockingham County, North Carolina and traveled on the Underground Railroad to Maidstone, Ontario, Canada in 1846. His father Hannabal told him, "If you remember nothing else that I tell you, John, remember 'the side of the tree that the moss grows on and the light of the North Star is the way to Canada and freedom, like my native Africa.'" I learned terms related to the Underground Railroad and came to understand that it was an informal network of safe houses and escape routes.

The Underground Railroad is considered by many to be the first great freedom movement in the Americas and the first time that people of different races and faiths worked together in harmony for freedom and justice. However, because it was such a secretive organization and people were risking their lives for freedom, codes were used. Escaped slaves and those who assisted them needed to have quick thinking and an abundance of wisdom and knowledge. The Underground Railroad became such an effective organization that there are still people today who think there was an actual train running underground from the south to the north, carrying people to freedom. The peak time for the Underground Railroad Freedom Movement was between 1820 and 1865. The term "Underground Railroad" is said to have arisen from an incident that took place in 1831.

Legend has it that a Kentucky runaway slave by the name of Tice David's swam across the Ohio River (Jordan River) with slave catchers, including his old master, in hot pursuit. After they reached the other side near the town of Ripley, Ohio (a busy "station" on the Underground Railroad) Tice eluded capture. He was probably aided by good people who were against slavery and wanted the practice ended. These freedom sympathizers were known as "abolitionists." The angry slave owner was heard to say, "He must have gone off on an underground railroad."

The need for secrecy was paramount as there were severe penalties for slaves and those who helped them to freedom. Therefore, railroad terminology was used to maintain secrecy and confuse the slave catchers.

The code words often used on the Underground Railroad were: "tracks" (routes fixed by abolitionist sympathizers); "stations" or "depots" (hiding places); "conductors" (guides on the Underground Railroad); "agents" (sympathizers who helped the slaves connect to the Railroad); "station masters" (those who hid slaves in their homes); "passengers," "cargo," "fleece," or "freight" (escaped slaves); "tickets" (indicated that slaves were traveling on the Railroad); "stockholders" (financial supporters who donated to the Railroad); "Freedom Trails" (the routes of the Railroad); "terminal," "heaven," or "Promised Land" (Canada and the northern free states); and "the drinking gourd" (the Big Dipper constellation—a star in this constellation pointed to the North Star, located on the end of the Little Dipper's handle).

The enslaved came from Africa with centuries-old knowledge of the stars; although the constellations



can shift, the North Star remains still in the night sky. Thus, the escaped slaves would run through the woods at night and often hide by day. They would thirst for freedom so much that at times they would kneel down and drink rainwater from the hoof-prints of cattle. They did this in order to quench their thirst for freedom and continue along the perilous Underground Railroad to the heaven they sang about in their songs—namely the northern United States and Canada. The freedom seekers realized that as long as that beacon of freedom in the night sky stayed stationary as they traveled, they were on course; if the North Star drifted, their course had changed. Although the enslaved were not allowed an education, they were intelligent individuals. They learned that the moss always grows on the north side of the tree. Maps made by former slaves, White abolitionists, and free Blacks would provide the freedom seekers with directions and geographical landmarks when travel was possible by day.

There were four main routes that the enslaved could follow: North along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to the northern United States and Canada; South to Florida and refuge with the Seminole Indians and to the Bahamas; West along the Gulf of Mexico and into Mexico; and East along the seaboard into Canada. The routes were often not in straight lines; they zigzagged in open spaces to mix their scent and throw off the bloodhounds. Sometimes they would even double back on their routes in order to confuse the slave catchers.

The enslaved could not carry a lot of supplies as that would slow them down. The conductors in the safe houses could provide meals, a bath, clothes, and shelter; however, in the woods and wilderness, the runaway enslaved had to hunt, forage, and use creative means to find food and sustenance. Along the Underground Railroad journey, the enslaved used available plant life for food and healing. Knowledge of plant-based herbal remedies that had been learned in Africa

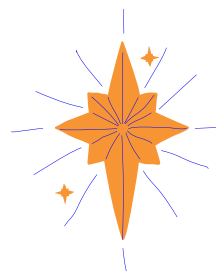


and on the plantations had to at times be applied. The enslaved learned that Echinacea stimulates the immune system; mint combats indigestion; teas can be made from roots; and poultices can be made from plants even in the winter when they're dormant.

Word of mouth, codes in newspapers and letters, bulletins, storytelling, and song contributed to helping the desperate travelers cross the 49th parallel to the "Canaan land" of Canada. They would learn that despite what their owners may have told them, the Detroit River was not 5,000 miles wide and the crows in Canada would not peck their eyes out. Song lyrics like, "Swing low sweet chariot, coming fore to carry me home," informed the escaping traveler on the Underground Railroad that it was time to leave the South. These lyrics, hopefully for the Freedom Seeker, would give way to lyrics from the "Song of the Fugitive:"

*I'm on my way to Canada a freeman's right to share; the cruel wrongs of slavery I can no longer bear; my heart is crushed within me, so while I remain a slave I am resolved to strike a blow for freedom or the grave. -- I now embark for yonder shore sweet land of liberty; our vessel soon will bear me o'er and I shall than be free. No more I'll dread the auctioneer, nor fear the Master's frowns; No more I'll tremble least I hear the baying of the hounds. O, Old Master, 'tis vain to follow me; I'm just in sight of Canada where the panting slave is free.*

All those courageous individuals involved in the Underground Railroad Freedom Movement had to learn new terminology and codes. It required great skill and knowledge to reach the Promised Land.



#### SOURCES:

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/shows/list/underground-railroad/stories-freedom/underground-railroad-terminology/>



# CODED WORD GRAPHIC ORGANIZER



## DIRECTIONS:



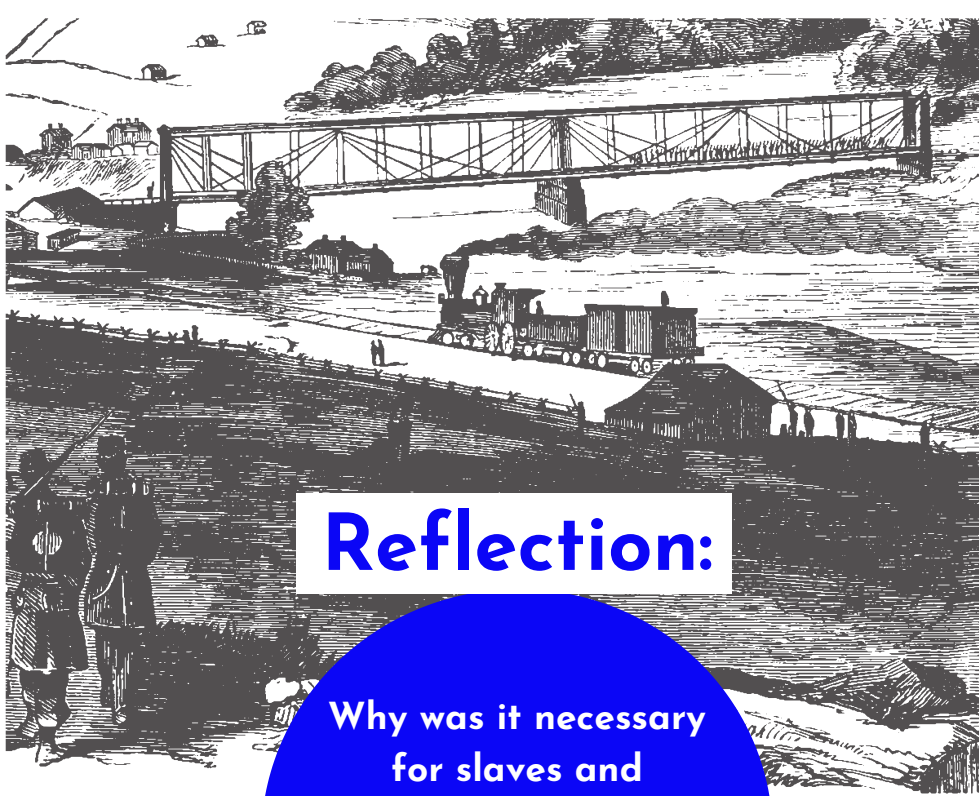
BEFORE READING THE ESSAY, FILL OUT WHAT YOU THINK THE "CODED MEANING" OF THE WORDS BELOW COULD BE. WHILE READING, DETERMINE THE HISTORICALLY ACCURATE MEANING OF THE GIVEN WORD.

**Predicted Meaning**

**Coded Word**

**Historical Meaning**

	Tracks	
	Stations/Depots	
	Conductors	
	Agents	
	Station Masters	
	Passengers	
	Cargo/Freight	
	Jordan River	
	Stockholders	
	Freedom Trails	
	Terminal	
	Heaven	
	Promised Land	
	The Drinking Gourd	



## Reflection:

Why was it necessary for slaves and Underground Railroad participants to communicate using coded words?